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Lansing, Robert

The power of democracy

Washington

1919

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# The Power of Democracy

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ADDRESS

BY

ROBERT LANSING

*Secretary of State of the United States*

BEFORE THE

Regents of the University of the State of New York  
at their Convocation at Albany on  
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## THE POWER OF DEMOCRACY.

ADDRESS BEFORE THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK, AT THEIR  
CONVOCAION AT ALBANY, ON OCTOBER 17, 1919.

There come times in the lives of nations as in the lives of individuals when they should pause and look back along the path which they have been following in order that they may go forward with a better knowledge and understanding of that which lies before them. The United States has reached such a time. The experiences of the last few years have affected materially our national life and our international relations. New conceptions of duty and of right have come into being. New manifestations of national power and national character have dispelled former doubt and apprehension as to the future. New ideas have assumed a prominent place in the political thought of the nation and will affect either for good or evil the economic and social life of the people. It is indeed a time to stop and consider the lessons of the days through which we have passed, to weigh the facts with deliberation, so that we may wisely meet the problems which lie before us as a nation.

As the great war recedes into the past we are beginning to obtain a truer perspective of America's part in the events which mean so much to civilization and to mankind. When one stands on a mountainside and gazes upward, he is unable to gain an adequate conception of the height of the mountain. It is only as he looks back at the peak from the distant plain that he comprehends how far it towers above its fellows. So it is with American achievement in this war. During the stress of the days of effort we thought only of the way to accomplish the task. To-day we realize the greatness of the accomplishment and all that it means.

And first of all we have obtained a truer conception of the American spirit and a better knowledge of American national character than we had before this time of trial. Whatever may have been said of the mercenary motives of our lives in former days, our acts have proven that this nation is at heart true to the loftiest

conceptions of duty and that it only needed the occasion to demonstrate to a skeptical world that a great democracy was ready—aye, eager—to make any sacrifice to protect its principles of political freedom from the destructive forces of military autocracy.

As we review that period of the war before the United States became a participant and consider the course of action which neutrality imposed upon us, I do not wonder that the Allied Nations, which, though exerting themselves to the uttermost, could barely maintain themselves against the great military power of Germany, should have considered us a people blinded to the truth by an inordinate fondness for wealth and ease, a people who had lost those high ideals which were the very pillars on which rested our national greatness and prosperity.

Nor is it strange that there should also have existed among the German people, even after we entered the war, a belief that we did so unwillingly, and that the real reason for our taking that step was because we had loaned so much money to the Allied Governments that their defeat would mean a tremendous loss to our financial institutions. Not only would our reputation as money worshippers induce such a belief, but the reason would appeal strongly to the German mind as logical and sensible.

Thank God, America never sank so low as that, even in thought! However great had become the power and temptation of wealth in the daily life of this nation—and we should not deny its ever-growing influence during the years before we entered the war—the soul of America held the flame of patriotism and loyalty to human rights which needed but a manifest danger to liberty to fan it into a consuming fire.

From that epoch-making day in April, 1917, when the Congress of the United States so gloriously responded to the President's call to arms in defense of human rights, and declared to the world that this Republic was in a state of war with the Imperial German Government, the zeal and might of a united people proclaimed to friend and foe alike that they had misjudged our national spirit. With a generosity unequaled, America gave, and gave, and gave, until the mind fairly staggers in the vain effort to comprehend the vastness of the sacrifice. Of its men the nation gave by the millions; of its wealth, by the billions; of its labor and energy and will, beyond any

computation. Without murmur or hesitation, and with an enthusiasm which has astounded the whole earth, men and women throughout this land answered every appeal of the Government to do or to abstain from doing, provided that they were assured that their compliance would help win the war.

The universal acceptance of the draft act was a triumph of the loyalty of the whole nation which was as amazing as it was splendid. The food-rationing without compulsion of law through the voluntary act of individuals was one of the most extraordinary manifestations of patriotic devotion in this extraordinary time. The ever-increasing burden of taxation, the frequent appeals for war loans almost fabulous in amount, and the repeated campaigns for the Red Cross and other humanitarian enterprises were met by the people with a spirit of approval and ready response which for spontaneity has no equal in the annals of any nation. The demands for increased products of the field, the mine and the factory were met with the same spirit of willingness and unflagging effort. It is a marvelous record of popular support for a national cause.

It is needless to review the achievements of our armies and navies, the organization and equipment of millions of men, their transportation overseas, and the essential and decisive part which they took in the final victory over the invading hosts of Germany. These are manifestations of the same spirit of devotion and zeal which inspired popular effort in America and bear witness to what Americanism means and is.

With such a shining record of achievement as a state and as a people, we can fearlessly challenge the world to show us a nation which rose so unitedly and so greatly to the support of an ideal. It is the more remarkable when we remember that the American people were not spurred to action by the presence on American soil of hostile armies or the sight of devastated homes; that they had not witnessed the scenes of horror and desolation which stir men's souls to the depths and call them to deeds of vengeance; that their cities and hamlets had not become masses of smoking ruins; and that their dear ones had not been dragged away to slavery or worse by a brutal soldiery. And yet with none of these personal incentives to take up arms, the United States as a nation

and its citizens as individuals entered the war against the Unholy Alliance of Central Europe with an iron determination to sacrifice their all, if need be, to vanquish the foe of human liberty.

What is the explanation of this spontaneous uprising of a whole people, a people numbered by the scores of millions? No doubt the disregard of American lives and rights, caused by the desperate character of the struggle, affected many, as well it might. No doubt the utter lawlessness of the German leaders and the brutality of the German soldiery awakened a passionate desire to punish a nation which permitted such deeds. No doubt the plots and intrigues of the Imperial Government against this country were factors in arousing the wrath of our people. But all these reasons combined are insufficient to explain the unanimity of the nation in its demand for war against the Central Powers. It was something deeper and more impelling than these causes of war which was decisive. Almost without warning an impulse to enter the war swept over the country, an impulse arising from the conviction, which had been unconsciously gaining strength for many months, that liberty and democracy throughout the world would be imperiled if the Germans were victorious. It was this great underlying certainty of impending disaster which induced the millions of our people, as a single man, to demand war.

Unmindful of the cost and inspired by a spirit of devotion to the cause, the American people deliberately entered the conflict with the stern purpose of doing their full share in saving democracy from the destruction which threatened it. We did not make war as avengers of the wrongs we had suffered. We made war as crusaders to wrest from profaning hands the sacred rights of mankind.

We are a nation of many bloods and many temperaments. We are a conglomerate people. From every quarter of the earth multitudes have flocked to our shores, seeking in America that freedom of thought and action and that possibility to rise which were denied them in the lands of their nativity. Without the ties of kinship and without the common language and mode of life which give to most nations a strong bond of unity, we, as a people, are held together by the great principle of democracy which is fundamental to our existence as a republic. Ours is a bond of political faith rather than a bond of common origin. In this we differ from other

peoples who possess a national character built up from the primitive relationship of the family and the tribe, from ancient tradition and the pride of race.

American nationality and American national character rest upon an idea of public and individual liberty which is the vital element in our national life. For that idea our forefathers struggled and triumphing they founded upon it this Republic. In the earlier period of our history as a nation those who came to our shores sought to escape from political oppression and a social system founded upon class distinctions. But in recent years the dominant motive of our immigrants has changed. It has been the desire of material benefit rather than to seek personal freedom that those of foreign birth have come to the United States. The reason is manifest. The spirit of liberalism in the past half century had become more and more potent in European countries and made less burdensome the monarchical and class privileges which had been so long the instruments of oppression. The deprivation of political rights and the all-pervading sense of wrong and injustice ceased to be the chief impulses driving men from the lands of their fathers to find new homes in America.

With this change of motive on the part of the aliens who in later years landed at our ports and mingled with our people, there was among thoughtful Americans a justifiable apprehension as to how strong and how impelling was the American idea among the millions of our foreign-born citizens and their children. It was reasonably asked whether those, without American blood and without hatred of the political and social institutions of the lands from which they came, would have the same passion for liberty, the same devotion to democracy, the same patriotic fervor and sacrificial spirit, which had been manifested in past generations of Americans.

This World War has dispelled that doubt forever. Conclusively and emphatically the answer has been given. The experience of the United States in this great crisis of history has proven to the world that a nation, though it be a mixture of races cemented together by a political idea, is as truly a nation as one rooted in common birth and in centuries of land tenure. We may not possess nationality in the physical sense, but we possess nationality in the spiritual sense. We know now that Americans of to-day, whatever may be their

blood, their language, their creed, their manners of life, are devoted to the American idea and to American ideals as are those whose ancestors were identified with the early life of this Republic.

The satisfaction, which we as loyal Americans feel in the spiritual fidelity of our people to the underlying principle of our national life, is intensified by the knowledge that a democracy, such as the United States, is able, because inspired with the true spirit of patriotism, to meet every emergency, however great. Patriotism, such as we witnessed in this country during the war years of 1917 and 1918, makes a democracy a unit in purpose and effort. Its manifestation has given us a stronger conviction than we had before that in the principle of democracy we have an instrument which can, through uniting the might of a people, overcome international injustice and prevent the commission of those wrongs which have so frequently been the causes of war.

Democracy as the central principle of national life operates other than by force in preventing international conflicts and in preserving peace among the nations. An enlightened people, who recognize moral obligation, possess a national conscience which responds to sentiments of justice and right. The more complete the individual liberty and the more universal the enlightenment so much the more sensitive is that conscience, so much the more strictly do the people hold their government to the path of rectitude. It is only through the instrumentality of democratic institutions that the national conscience can give that expression of purpose and attain that control over governmental action which inspire for the nation the respect of its own people and the confidence of foreign peoples.

Let democracy be honestly and firmly established as the principle upon which the political system of a nation is erected, and a government is bound to develop which is responsive to the collective conscience of the people. With a government of that sort we can deal frankly and without suspicion of hidden motive because its acts are tempered by the great moral sense which directs the popular will. While this may be considered an over-statement because of the measure of ignorance which prevails among some peoples and because of the common weaknesses of human nature, with which only the idealist fails to reckon, I think that in general we may regulate our conduct in international affairs on the assurance that a truly,

democratic state would not knowingly wage an aggressive or unjust war against another state.

But there is another reason—and possibly this is even stronger than the one which I have just stated—for asserting that the principle of democracy is the great enemy of war as well as the great guarantor of international peace. If I have drawn true conclusions from history, I am correct in saying that the people of every nation entitled to be called “civilized” desire peace and abhor war; that a people, appreciating the real object, have never entered upon a war of conquest provided their will found true and free expression; and that they do not willfully oppress the weak or act unjustly toward their neighbors. In a word, the conscience of an enlightened people—and I mean by “people” *all* the people and not a privileged political class—checks the evil motives of their Government and only fails to direct national conduct aright when their public servants are not subject to the will of all or when they misrepresent the popular desires.

To insure to the world a continuing state of international peace democracy should be made the standing policy of civilization. I mean real democracy and not the mere form without the substance. Real democracy, based upon individual political equality and free from class privilege or influence, is the only agency through which expression can be given to the conscience of a nation and to the popular hatred of war. Democratic nations are not aggressive and domineering. They resent and resist aggression by others. They are not influenced by cupidity or improper ambitions. They are just to the powerful and to the powerless. They do not violate their word or permit personal ambitions to divert them from the constant purpose to do that which is right.

I am firmly convinced that, if every nation was a democracy in reality, as is this Republic, universal peace would be an accomplished fact and not a goal toward which the world looks with longing eyes striving to devise methods by which it may be attained.

Meanwhile we must seek other means of checking the wrongful use of force among nations. Every agency therefore which has for its purpose the prevention of international wars and the preservation of international peace deserves the earnest and generous support of all men whose horizon is not limited by selfishness or ignorance. The



American people with their abhorrence of war should be the last to reject any instrumentality which gives promise of preserving amity between nations and of hindering, if it does not actually prevent, an appeal to force. Political antipathies and partizanship ought not to influence the consideration of a great plan of international organization to support a state of peace. Objections have been made to the Covenant of the League of Nations which is incorporated in the Peace Treaty with Germany. It is not to be wondered at, considering the complexity of the subject. In fact I do not believe such a document could ever be so perfectly drafted that it would win unanimous approval. But none of the objections, over which so much oratory has been spilt, bulks large compared with the will and purpose of the nations expressed in the Covenant. It is my unqualified judgment that the League of Nations should be fully tested in its present form before being condemned, if for no other reason than that to reject it would be to discourage future attempts to obtain unity of action among the nations in the effort to avoid international conflicts. We can not as an influential power in the world assume such a responsibility.

Admitting, for the sake of argument, all the faults and undesirable features which its bitterest opponents have raised against the Covenant, I am prepared to say that it ought to be adopted and tried for it represents to-day an international concert devoted to peace. The United States, I am convinced, will not be the nation to check this movement or to discourage the civilized states of the earth from seeking by united purpose and counsel to restrain the use of force in the settlement of their disputes. If after a fair trial the League fails to accomplish its objects, then is the time by amendment to make the Covenant more efficient.

Such action as that which was taken by the Conference at Paris when it adopted the Covenant, makes for peace but does not insure its permanency. It is a powerful agency but not an all-powerful one. The only certainty of unbroken peace in this world, I believe, lies in the general adoption of democracy as the supreme political principle of all nations. Until that time comes we must use other agencies but must not expect too much of them. Yet we should never lose sight of the real preventive or cease to advance the policy of democracy, of real democracy, among the nations.

It fell to the lot of this country to demonstrate the might as well as the spirit of democracy. In this most critical time the United States accomplished all that had ever been claimed for it and more than had been expected of it. By its deeds it proved that a people acting in their sovereign right possess the will and the power to meet a foreign foe with vigor and success. We have lived through an epoch which tested our democratic institutions to the extreme, and we have stood the test. Thus in time of war democracy is magnificently vindicated.

To-day new problems have arisen to try the efficiency of democracy. Victors over autocracy, we have discredited the system of class based upon birth and title, and we have now to meet a new classism as strongly though not as manifestly hostile to democracy and equality of individuals as the old classism. It is in foreign lands that this new enemy has most radically developed and openly attacked individual liberty. But this country is not free from the danger. Today the rights of particular classes over other classes of our population are being preached in our streets, and appeals to selfishness, to envy and to ignorance, under the guise of justice, are being sent broadcast throughout the land. Apostles of unrest and even of revolution, as well as others less radical and more sincere, taking advantage of the industrial and commercial confusion resulting from the war, are seeking converts to doctrines which aim to grant special privileges to certain groups of citizens and to deprive others of those private rights which are inseparable from the American conception of individual liberty.

We must not close our eyes to the progress of events and to the tendency of the forces which are being exerted. We must not rest in a state of indifference or of false confidence. It is a time for action. Democracy is in danger, from within rather than from outside the body politic. Again we, Americans, are called to the defense of the American principle which is being attacked not only by insidious foes but by friends who fail to see the wrong which they are doing. We must meet this new attack with the same unyielding and courageous spirit as that with which our soldiers met the Germans on the soil of France. It took us long to realize the great menace of German imperialism to the vital principle of our national life, but when it was realized we unitedly entered the con-

flict and fought on to victory. I believe that realization of the present danger will again call forth the best there is in this Republic and we will succeed in overcoming those who seek to pervert democracy by injecting into it a species of class imperialism which is more attractive than the ancient forms because it appeals to those who have suffered in the past from injustice and from denial of that equality of opportunity which it is the duty of democracy to maintain.

No truer declaration was ever uttered than "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," and the American people ought to-day to take that thought to heart and resist every movement which is out of accord with the liberty and equality of the citizens of this Republic without distinction as to race, class, or condition. The dangers, as I see them, are—a disposition to compromise the principle of equal rights with the demand for special rights; an apparent willingness to conciliate by concessions in order to avoid for the time being at least those evil conditions which threaten to result from the denial of class privileges; a timidity in meeting the issue squarely and boldly pointing out in what way it menaces the idea of democracy; and last, but by no means least, the tendency of many leaders of political thought to temporize with and placate certain elements of our population by accepting in a measure undemocratic doctrines which plainly violate the essential principle of the American political system.

During the progress of a war opportunism, if it does not mean lawlessness, is always justifiable in the struggle for victory, but in time of peace when face to face with great social and economic problems, national and international, opportunism is the resort of shallow minds impelled by political ambition and greed for power, or by a moral cowardice which is as contemptible as it is un-American. We can not meet successfully the present problems by following leaders, who to advance their own political fortunes counsel an abandonment of principle for the sake of expediency. By adopting such a policy we will weaken the American conception of democracy and encourage those who consciously or unconsciously strive for a classism which can not be reconciled to that conception. If we had listened to the opportunist, we would never have been an independent people; we would never have been a union; we would

never have entered the World War. If we listen to the opportunist now, America will never accomplish its promised destiny or prove to the world that democracy is capable of meeting any crisis however grave, and of protecting individual liberty from its ancient enemy, special privilege, however disguised by popular phrase or pleasing epigram.

Democracy has made this nation what it is. Democracy can make the world what it ought to be. Whatever may happen, we must not shrink from the duty of maintaining in this country democracy in its purity, and we must not cease our efforts to advance its cause throughout the earth. A great chapter of the history of the United States is being written in these days. It must not be recorded that we made "the world safe for democracy," but that we failed to make "America safe for democracy."

Let us not forget what American democracy has done for human liberty. Let us not forget what democracy can do for universal peace. Democracy was worth fighting for and worth dying for, and it is worth guarding sacredly from every contaminating influence. With it as the dominant idea of our national life no American need fear for the future of this Republic. With it as the supreme political principle of the nations we may look forward to an era of permanent peace.



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